

Introduction

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Defining cryptozoology

Bernard Heuvelmans, the man widely dubbed the ‘father of cryptozoology’ (see Turner, this volume) defined cryptozoology as ‘[t]he scientific study of hidden animals, i.e., of still unknown animal forms about which only testimonial and circumstantial evidence is available, or material evidence considered insufficient by some!’ (1988, cited in Coleman and Clark 1999: 76). Turner’s opening chapter provides the historical context for the contemporary study of cryptozoology. Turner explains that the term ‘cryptid’ was coined in the late twentieth century to refer to the category of anomalous animals who were the purview of the emergent, hybrid (and frequently lay) discipline of cryptozoology. While cryptozoologists and their cryptid subjects existed in something of a liminal zone in academia and popular culture throughout the twentieth century, more recent discoveries of previously unknown animals such as the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*) have reignited contemporary interest.

Along similar lines to Heuvelmans, Eberhart defined cryptozoology as ‘the study of the evidence for animals that are undescribed by science’ (Eberhart 2002: xlvii, cited in Walsh and Goldman, this volume). However, in their chapter Walsh and Goldman argue that science ‘comprises disputed hypotheses and competing narratives’ and consequently there is no definitive ‘truth’ to be found in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and verification alone. Surprisingly, this was a point also acknowledged by Heuvelmans himself who, despite conceiving of cryptozoology as a science, nonetheless recognised the benefits of combining scientific theories and methods with those from a disparate range of disciplines:

[The h]idden animals with which cryptozoology is concerned, are by definition very incompletely known. To gain more credence, they have to be documented as carefully and exhaustively as possible by a search through the most diverse fields of knowledge. Cryptozoological research thus requires not only a thorough grasp of most of the zoological sciences, including, of course physical anthropology, but also a certain training in such extraneous branches of knowledge as mythology, linguistics,

archaeology and history. It will consequently be conducted more extensively in libraries, newspaper morgues, regional archives, museums, art galleries, laboratories, and zoological parks rather than in the field!

(Heuvelmans 1988)

Heuvelmans was adamant that cryptozoologists should be concerned only with real flesh and blood animals, stating that what he termed ‘unexpected animals’ (for example mythical creatures and ghostly apparitions) were not to be included in the discipline’s remit. However, Heuvelmans’ unequivocal rejection of ‘unexpected animals’ from the category ‘cryptid’, a position maintained by many prominent cryptozoologists (e.g. Coleman and Clark 1999) may have been misguided at best and ethnocentric at worst. As many of the contributions to this volume demonstrate, the reality of animals is a matter of perspective. The dividing line between zoological specimens and what Heuvelmans, Coleman, Clark and many other cryptozoologists (not to mention mainstream zoologists) would dismiss as ‘paranormal’ or ‘Fortean’ entities such as the Zanzibar leopard (*Panthera pardus adersi*) and the ‘domestic’ leopards kept by witches to do their bidding (Walsh and Goldman, this volume), Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) and *tekhumia*vi (‘humans in the form of a tiger’) (Heneise, this volume) or the Mongolian wolf (*Canis lupus chanco*) and *chono hün* (‘wolf people’) (High, this volume), is blurred or porous to say the least. The ontological turn in anthropology (see Kohn 2015 for a recent summary) has sought to raise awareness of other ways of being, of realities and worlds which may be at odds with our own (and with a ‘Western’, ‘scientific’ ontology), and which, consequently, we may struggle (or even fail) to understand.

Ontological cryptozoology

While ontology has always been at the heart of the anthropological endeavour, the ‘turn’ has foregrounded the many and diverse worlds inhabited not just by human groups and individuals belonging to ‘other’ cultures (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998) but also by other living beings (see, for example, Kohn 2015). Shaking the primacy of scientific knowledge based in symbolic language, the constructs of culture, and (for anthropologists in particular) a representationalist framework, an ontologically informed approach gives us cause to question Heuvelmans’ definition. Indeed, while anthropologists have traditionally approached the different human groups they study as unique ‘cultures’ with specific belief systems which shape members’ perspectives of ‘the world’, the ontological turn has encouraged anthropologists to see that there are, in fact, multiple worlds, none of which is more real or valid than any other. As a result, the worlds of forests (Kohn 2013), marine micro-organisms (Helmreich 2009), hyenas (Baynes-Rock 2015) and mushrooms (Tsing 2015) to name but a few, have become legitimate foci of anthropological attention. However, these non-human or other-than-human beings are more than just anthropological

subjects. Indeed, these life forms think, feel and respond to their worlds in ways which also influence the lives and therefore worlds of others, including humans. Interacting or engaging with non-human others, either through the scholarly process of participant observation or through shared co-existence, enables all participants in the interaction to shape and be shaped by the interaction and the others in it – a process Ingold and Palsson (2013) have termed ‘biosocial becoming’.

Cryptids, like any other non-human beings or entities, shape and are shaped by their interactions with human groups and individuals, and we are shaped by our interactions with them. The form these interactions take also has a role to play in how we come to know and understand cryptids. Through immersing themselves in the worlds where humans and cryptids co-exist or come into contact, the contributors to this volume are uniquely positioned to introduce these ‘unknown’ creatures. However, it is worth keeping in mind that these creatures are only ‘unknown’ to science and to those outside of the particular places where they are at home. For the humans (and in some cases other animals) who share those homes, these cryptids are very well known indeed.

Perspectival multinaturalism and cryptid personhood

In many cultural contexts which may, for the sake of simplicity, be classified as ‘animist’, it is generally recognised that ‘humans and animals can move in and out of different species’ perspectives by temporarily taking on alien kinds of bodies’ (Willerslev 2004: 629). Moreover, according to Willerslev, in relation to the Siberian Yukaghirs in particular ‘this capacity to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another species is one of the key aspects of being a person’ (2004: 629). For many Amazonian peoples, interactions between animate beings are similarly governed by what Viveiros de Castro terms ‘perspectival multinaturalism’ (1998), a process which allows for differences between these animate beings to be transcended via what might also be termed inter-subjective interactions (Hurn 2012). For perspectival multinaturalism to work, all animate beings must recognise themselves (and others) as persons, but this personhood is, as Kohn observes (2007), dependent on the ‘ontological makeup’ of all concerned, which leads to creature-specific forms of personhood (jaguar personhood, vulture personhood, human personhood). Kohn gives the example of vultures for whom the smell of a rotting carcass is comparable to human appreciation of a pot of manioc tubers (2007: 7). In other words, while a rotting carcass may be disgusting for humans, for creatures with alternative ways of being in the world, such as vultures, it is deliciously appetising.

According to Ingold’s earlier writings on the subject, in most ‘Western’ contexts, ‘personhood as a state of being is not open to non-human animal kinds’ (2000: 48). The so-called animal and ontological turns have demonstrated that this position is untrue for many people, and it might be suggested that the ‘existence’ of cryptids further challenges the primacy of human

personhood in the ‘Western’ world also. Indeed, in many respects the human informants on whose testimonies and experiences the chapters in this volume rest – those who have encountered cryptids in various forms and situations – could be seen to be engaging in a process of perspectival multinaturalism similar to those described by anthropologists such as Viveiros de Castro (1998).

Knowing cryptids

Merz’s chapter provides a clear example of this process. By recognising that the *siyawesi* bush dwarves are real in the eyes and minds (and bodies too) of her Bebelibe informants, Merz concludes they can only be real. While she may not have seen or experienced them directly herself, Merz lives with the Bebelibe, and the Bebelibe unequivocally share their world with the *siyawesi*. As one of Merz’s informants concluded, ‘just because science cannot prove that the *siyawesi* exist, does not mean that they do not’. This long-standing tension between science and folk knowledge was also revealed by one of Bernard’s Afrikaaner informants who felt the need to come up with a scientific explanation for mermaids, combining local beliefs with knowledge of the biology of endemic, zoologically known species.

In numerous ethnographic analyses of witchcraft, sorcery, shamanism, shape-shifting, spirit possession and occult apparitions, these ‘fantastical’ beliefs, practices, sightings and experiences constitute social facts, but for many ethnographers they have also become lived realities. Favret-Saada and Cullen (1980), Stoller (2013) and Turner (2011) all famously underwent conversion experiences whilst researching witchcraft, sorcery and healing rituals respectively when they found their lives inexplicably and irreversibly affected by the actions of their informants or by what they experienced.

Bernard takes up this position and argues that in order to fully understand cryptids not just as our informants experience them, but as beings in their own right, anthropologists must transcend the limitations of their personal, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, and become radical empiricists. In Bernard’s case this has meant consciously undergoing the rigours of training and initiation as a *sangoma*. For Attala too, experiencing the serpentine cryptids invoked during the consumption of the hallucinogenic brew *ayahuasca* necessitated that she also consumed the drug.

Admittedly not all cryptids lend themselves to a radical empiricist approach, but in his chapter Franklin nonetheless highlights the importance of empirical research when it comes to ‘knowing’ cryptids in general, pointing out that some existing commentaries are speculative and as a result, bark up the wrong tree when it comes to analysing sightings. For example, in his populist publication *Feral*, journalist George Monbiot (2013) suggests that big cats, along with other (what he feels are) paranormal phenomena, reflect human desires in post-modernity and asks ‘Could it be that illusory big cats also answer an unmet need? As our lives have become tamer and more predictable,

as the abundance and diversity of nature has declined, could these imaginary creatures have brought us something we miss?’ Such a position fails to take seriously the lived experiences of the countless individuals who encounter big cats or other cryptids. For my own informants, the ‘Alien Big Cats’ (ABCs) they experienced were recognised as other actors within the rural landscape, despite their unexpected presence (Hurn 2009). The animals were mobilised as symbols of nationalistic resistance but more importantly, their ability to survive in an alien environment and maintain the enigma of cryptid (i.e. avoid detection, capture and the process of scientific classification) amply demonstrated their personhood and agency.

For Heneise (this volume), the piecing together of different accounts of Naga *tekhumiavi* (tiger-men) and juxtaposing them with his own subjective experiences of living with the threat of Venezuelan *nahuals* (shape shifters) in his youth, forced him to reflect on the reality of these beings who defy the laws of science. Indeed, for the anthropologists who engage with cryptids as social facts and lived realities, they, like other ‘occult’ beliefs, practices and beings, are recognised as important and very powerful aspects of contemporary social and political life (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Niehaus 2001; West 2005).

Regardless of their zoological status then, cryptids become real, become ‘persons’ to be known through lived experiences. Indeed, cryptids of all shapes and sizes come to life when they are encountered, and encounters take many forms, ranging from direct personal experience through to stories recounted over generations (see Hurn, this volume and Ingold 2013a; 2013b). Therefore, through knowing cryptids empirically, the contributors to this volume are in a much better place to understand them, both as significant others for human informants and as beings or entities in their own right.

Challenges to scientific knowledge and traditional ways of life

Walsh and Goldman focus their chapter on the Zanzibar leopard (*Panthera pardus adersi*), an animal classified as extinct by the international scientific community. For Zanzibaris however, the animal is still widely believed to exist both as a zoological species and as a witches’ familiar. Heneise’s chapter also explores the apparent contradiction between scientific and folk knowledge in Nagaland. Recent scientific research on tiger populations in northeastern India suggests that while they are Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), there is considerable genetic and morphological diversity between them and tiger populations elsewhere in India. However, exact population density is unknown and while tiger populations have been documented in neighbouring Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, according to the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), there have been no official sightings of tigers in Nagaland prior to 2015 (Jhala et al. 2015).

Perhaps surprisingly, in some of the cases described here, the church has played an important role in keeping cryptids alive. In Merz’s chapter for

example, the church allows for a syncretic fusion of local beliefs in the *siyawesi* with Christian teachings. *Siyawesi* become synonymous with the devil in the local form of *Disenpode*, and in the process their role in local cosmology shifts from facilitating human civilisation at the community level (i.e. bringing agriculture to the Bebelibe) to destructive malevolence at the individual level (causing illness, death and other types of misfortune) – characteristics shared with other capricious cryptids such as *Mami Wata* (Schmidt, this volume) who intervene in the lives and fates of mortals who cross their paths and who therefore command a healthy respect or on occasion, fear. Indeed, the demonisation of liminal beings such as *siyawesi* (Merz) and mermaids (Schmidt) who are seen as dangerous (and at times specifically satanic) is also instructive, and both High's *chono* (wolf people) and Merz's *siyawesi* are divine messengers, sent to try and instil (or regain) order or to act as mediators between humans and the nonhuman realm.

Perceptions of *siyawesi* amongst individual Bebelibe as discussed by Merz are also inextricably linked to post-colonial modernity, the concomitant exposure to capitalistic ideals of materialism, individuality and, again (and most significantly), a shift away from traditional values and practices. Schmidt too notes that mermaids, and specifically *Mami Wata*, have become increasingly popular in post-colonial contexts of socio-cultural and economic flux, mass communication and increased mobility. Schmidt's chapter also reveals how cryptids can be used as political tools for creating and maintaining a sense of group identity. Indeed, for many of the contributors (e.g. Heneise, High, King) cryptids serve a significant social function in promoting (and often ensuring) adherence to traditional beliefs and practices.

Attala's chapter deals with particularly controversial cryptids: the monstrous snake apparitions who make themselves known to users of the hallucinatory brew Ayahuasca. What is particularly fascinating about this ritual process is that regardless of the background of the individual participants, visions share certain characteristics, most notably serpentine forms. Whether these snakes spew forth from the initiand's mouth or guts, or materialise from the ground beneath their feet, the serpents' presence, and the knowledge they impart, is life-changing. But more importantly, initiands experience these snakes as real, tangible entities, both during the hallucination and long after the effects of Ayahuasca have worn off. For King's shark fishers, the *ganka* is also an integral ritual actor. While they never actually 'see' the *ganka*, the creature nonetheless imparts life-changing knowledge and helps to maintain social relationships. Being on *ganka* watch initiates novice deck hands into the hierarchical but also deeply phenomenological environment of the fishing community. Anxiously searching for the *ganka* also encourages green deck-hands to become attuned to the maritime environment in ways which may not otherwise have occurred to them and which, during the long, changeable and often perilous journeys out at sea, could make the difference between life and death.

Conserving cryptids and valuing local knowledge

The controversy, in 2015, surrounding the first ever sighting by Western scientists of the ‘ghost bird’ or moustached kingfisher (*Actenoides bougainvillei excelsus*) by a research team from the American Museum of Natural History was, perhaps, an example of how not to engage in cryptozoological research. The scientist leading the research, Christopher Filardi, director of Pacific Programs at the Museum’s Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, described the team’s mission on the project blog in the language of cryptozoology, emphasising the enigmatic and ephemeral nature of cryptids:

some species defy the familiar. There are the poorly known, reclusive animals that even when observed never fully shake the legend and mystery surrounding them. We search for them in earnest but they are seemingly beyond detection except by proxy and story. They are ghosts, until they reveal themselves in a thrilling moment of clarity and then they are gone again. Maybe for another day, maybe a year, maybe a century.
(Filardi 2015: n.p.)

The urgency of finding the kingfisher was palpable in the blog and Filardi likened his team’s ‘discovery’ of the bird to ‘a creature of myth come to life’ (Filardi 2015: n.p.). However, contrary to Heuvelmans’ emphasis on knowing cryptids in order to protect them, Filardi and his team caught and killed their specimen. The body was deemed necessary for scientific understanding of the species, and to encourage investment in conservation. When called to account by the world’s media, Filardi justified his actions on the basis of local knowledge of the bird which suggested that it was, in fact, relatively common, with a population in the region of 4,000 individuals. This indigenous information was allegedly corroborated by his team’s survey, although the dead specimen was the only example of a male they saw. This particular cryptid, then, was only ‘unknown’ to Western scientists and not to those with whom the unfortunate ‘he’ co-existed.

Rather than prioritising ‘science’ as the arbiter of truth and the ultimate product of human social development, the accounts of the contributors to this volume reveal the currency and value of so-called ‘indigenous ontologies’ which do not necessarily lend themselves to scientific interpretation and analysis, but instead offer alternative ways of being in, engaging with and understanding the world. That local people know about the presence of a particular category of animal which has either been disputed by Western science or is currently unknown to us is reminiscent of colonial narratives of discovery and appropriation. Forth’s chapter is a perfect example of the sort of cryptozoology which Heuvelmans had in mind when he coined the term. Using eye-witness and anecdotal testimonials, both historical and contemporary, Forth suggests in his chapter that there exists on the Indonesian island of Flores an endemic but ‘mystery’ felid (*ngo ngoe*) which has eluded scientific discovery but which

local people recognise as being of a different order to domestic cats (*Felis catus*). Forth's chapter, along with those of several other contributors (Turner, Walsh and Goldman) emphasises the importance of indigenous or 'folk' knowledge when it comes to documenting and analysing the existence of cryptids on the ground, demonstrating how anthropologists (or ethnozoologists), in collaboration with local people, are well positioned to shed light on cryptids and interpret them in ways which utilise a combination of scientific, historical and local knowledge. Consequently the volume builds on the considerable anthropological precedent for valuing indigenous knowledge and recognising local people as ethnozoologists (or ethnoprimateologists, or ethnoethologists) (e.g. Cormier 2010; Bicker et al. 2003; cf. Sillitoe 2010). Indeed, as Hecht and Cooper (2014) observe, those humans who come into regular contact with animals can often, despite any formal training, record and comment accurately on the behavioural repertoires they observe. Not only that, but their knowledge and understanding can often rival that of academic specialists. While this certainly is the case in some contexts (e.g. Cormier 2010), Walsh and Goldman's research reveals that local people can also be unreliable witnesses, and potential conflicts of interest (e.g. illegal hunting) are difficult to mitigate against.

In his more recent work, Heuvelmans revised the remit of cryptozoology as follows; while maintaining his original emphasis on cryptids as real flesh and blood animals he argued that:

The essential task of cryptozoology is, first, to establish a physical and behavioural identikit portrait, as precise and detailed as possible, for each apparently unknown animal about which one has significant information and then, if it is truly new, to try and discern its most probable zoological identity. Only then, knowing where, when and how to track it down, can one try with some hope of success to encounter it in nature, *in order to better know it and to protect it*.

(2013: 10 emphasis added)

Heuvelmans' recognition that cryptids need protecting is also echoed by some of the contributors here, and there are numerous ethical issues at play. Bernard, for example, makes a point of not disclosing the location of her fieldwork, while King disguises the *ganka* habitat to ensure their continued existence. Consequently there emerges a conflict of interest between engaging with cryptids as 'real' and potentially exposing them to greater attention which could be damaging, as was the case for the leopards discussed by Walsh and Goodman. For Schmidt however, the representation of certain deities in cryptid form has been key to their survival. The liminality of the mermaid has facilitated the appropriation of various incarnations of water goddesses far beyond their origin in African religious traditions, enabling them to survive the journey from Africa to Brazil, North America and Europe.

In her chapter, High points out that while cryptids and nonhuman entities more generally tend to be evaluated from human perspectives, wolves are

important entities in their own right. Wolves (and other animals) play significant roles in maintaining ecosystems (e.g. Monbiot 2013) while anthropogenic activities (such as mining in this case) cause significant ecological damage. The big cats encountered by Hurn and her informants in Wales have also impacted on the local ecosystem in significant ways, and their ability to act as keystone predators has been identified as a reason to protect them (2009).

So, the relationship between cryptids and conservation is complex and at times problematic. While in some instances, for example when the cryptids concerned are thought to be variants of known zoological species, the documentation of their presence is important for mobilising support and resources needed to conserve and protect habitats (e.g. Walsh and Goldman). However, the conservation agenda becomes muddled in habitats where tangible, zoologically recognised animals incarnate as ephemeral entities. In such circumstances, the conservation of the cryptid is dependent on the maintenance of local cultural traditions, and the mitigation of conflict which is often rooted in fearful coexistence. For example, in Nagaland, the first official sighting of a Bengal tiger in 2015 brought home the difficulties of living in close proximity to even small populations of such enigmatic and powerful keystone predators when a lone tigress was killed by Naga villagers in Medziphema after she entered the village and attacked livestock and a young man.

The fear of wolf people among Mongolian herders described in High's paper resonates with the fear of 'devil workers' in South America described by Taussig (2010). Denouncing individuals who behave uncharitably, or who pursue selfish agendas as *chono* ('wolf') (or as having entered into contracts with the devil in Taussig's case) serves to undermine the threat to traditional values and family units posed by capitalist enterprises and the associated commodity fetishism which can accompany the sudden influx of material wealth. A similar practice occurs in South Africa, as described in Bernard's chapter, whereby cryptids (in this case water serpents and mermaids) coerce their victims into making a pact which bestows material wealth and good fortune on individuals but with grave consequences for their kin.

While cryptids may strike fear into the hearts and minds of the humans with whom they interact, the reality is that they have much more to fear from us. In her chapter, Turner discusses a selection of creatures who embody cryptidity in different ways and uses these examples to argue that cryptids are, to use Lévi-Strauss' oft cited maxim, not just 'good to think' but also good to question in the sense that they force us to reflect on our relationships with the natural world in the Anthropocene. Because human lives impact on the lives and deaths of so many other animals, and because our actions can bring about the end of 'whole ways of life', Van Dooren (2014) suggests that narratives which seek to understand this loss might be communicated 'in a way that significantly *implicates* us – causally, perhaps emotionally, and certainly ethically' (2014: 4). That the different chapters 'tell lively stories' (Van Dooren 2014) about the lives and deaths of cryptids in a causal, emotional and ethical manner matters, because in this time of

unprecedented anthropogenic activity, millions of animals die without ever being known by science.

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